



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE

From Headquarters to Field: Responding to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in West Africa

Shelley Cheatham

In 2002, reports surfaced of sexual exploitation and abuse of refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in coastal countries of West Africa. Most disturbing were the allegations that some of the very people responsible for providing basic social services and protection—humanitarian workers and U.N. peacekeepers—were involved in perpetrating the abuses.

Allegations of abuse first arose during a joint Save the Children/UK (SC/UK) and Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assessment mission in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea in 2002. The assessment team received numerous reports of sexual exploitation and abuse while interviewing refugees and IDPs in the three countries. The team's findings highlighted the unequal power relationship between refugee and IDP communities on the one hand and humanitarian workers, including local staff, and peacekeepers on the other. This disparity, compounded by the beneficiaries' strong dependence on humanitarian assistance for survival, elevated the potential for exploitation



U.N. soldiers in Liberia receive training in sexual exploitation prevention and response (Augustine Mulbah, USAID).

and abuse. Furthermore, the team noted a lack of common legal and cultural understanding among beneficiaries and the humanitarian community of what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse.

Galvanized by the reports, the international community moved to address the problem and counter future sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian emergencies. The U.N. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), comprising U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Red Cross Movement, established a Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises and formulated a plan of action to respond to the issue. Investigations and recommendations resulted in the publication of several U.N. documents condemning the sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable populations, and more clearly defining terms and standards of behavior.

In addition to the U.N.-led efforts, humanitarian organizations and donors took individual actions aimed at countering sexual exploitation and abuse. For example, the USG now requires that implementing emergency partners adopt a staff Code of Conduct consistent with the IASC principles on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. Independently, several humanitarian organizations initiated efforts among their own staff to raise awareness, provide training, and require all employees to sign a code of conduct prohibiting sexual misconduct. Furthermore, the humanitarian community as a whole made a concerted effort to integrate protection principles into humanitarian policies and programs through staff trainings and wider adoption of organizational codes of conduct.

Recognizing that sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be prevented by legislation and regulations alone, OFDA is increasingly tackling the issue at multiple levels: from international policies to local implementation,

from headquarters to project sites, and from directors to field staff. At the headquarters level, OFDA provides financial and technical support to the American Council for Voluntary International Action (InterAction), the largest alliance of U.S.-based international development and humanitarian NGOs, with more than 160 members. In 2002, InterAction established a Protection Working Group to focus on a variety of protection issues, including the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian crises. A subgroup, formed in 2006, specifically addresses sexual exploitation and abuse. The subgroup is assisting members in developing codes of conduct and related policies, and provides an essential forum for members to share best practices and lessons learned.

“InterAction is pleased to be collaborating closely with OFDA and other elements of the U.S. Government, as well as with the United Nations, in programs to protect vulnerable populations worldwide, particularly children, against sexual abuse and exploitation. We believe these programs are having a positive impact on the lives of vulnerable populations.” – InterAction

Despite concerted efforts following the 2002 assessment, SC/UK found in late 2005 that children in some IDP camps—since closed—and returnee communities in Liberia remained at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. In focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, children reported having sex with adults perceived to have wealth or status, including relief workers, U.N. peacekeepers, community leaders, and teachers, in exchange for money, food, and other goods and favors. In addition to reinforcing the need for continuing prevention efforts, a SC/UK discussion paper disseminated in May 2006 emphasized the lack of adequate reporting, investigative, and monitoring systems.

Understanding the need to raise awareness of the issue at all levels of the humanitarian community, OFDA began supporting the Building Safer Organizations (BSO) project, co-managed by InterAction and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). Through regional field-based trainings and workshops, the project aims to build the capacity of NGOs to respond to allegations of abuse by providing organizations with the tools to implement safe and accessible reporting systems and to carry out high-quality, legally sustainable investigations. Workshop participants return to their organizations with an enhanced understanding of the issue and with the required skills to address it. The trainings also enhance overall humanitarian protection efforts as participants learn to respond to allegations of abuse impartially, preventing further harm to both beneficiaries and accused.

At the country level in Liberia, OFDA and State/PRM are co-funding a stand-alone protection initiative implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with SC/UK, the American Refugee Committee, and the Christian Children’s Fund as collaborating partners. IRC and its partners are also working with a Monrovia-based NGO consortium, as well as with the U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), to support ongoing efforts and the Government of Liberia to build capacity to address this issue.

Through this project, IRC is establishing a Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Unit to serve as a resource for NGOs that are committed to combating sexual exploitation and abuse by working to develop, strengthen, and adopt codes of conduct and other standards for prevention and response within their own organizations and the populations they serve. By continuing to standardize procedures for receiving and investigating reports, the project aims to reduce confusion and frustration among both the beneficiary and humanitarian communities, as well as to protect the accuser and the accused during an investigation. The project is also expanding knowledge and expertise of the issue through trainings for NGO workers and beneficiary communities.

Affected by violence, displacement, and hunger, refugee and IDP communities rely on humanitarian organizations to help look out for their well-being, not only ensuring food, shelter, and necessities for survival, but also protecting human dignity. To protect the well-being of children and other vulnerable populations in emergencies, OFDA is strengthening efforts to counter future incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse. By targeting all levels of the humanitarian community, OFDA-supported trainings and working groups increase awareness and provide the necessary tools to the appropriate people to build a better, safer environment for those in need.